



STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS AND ADOLESCENTS' EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between stressful life events and emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents. The study also aimed at examining the prevalence of adolescents' problem behaviors with the experiences of stressful life events.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Cross Sectional Study

PLACE AND DURATION OF THE STUDY

The study was carried out in Gujrat, Rawalpindi and Islamabad during the year 2014.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

A sample of 303 adolescents (164 girls, 139 boys) aged 12-16 years ($M=15.27$, $SD=1.20$) was assessed with the Stressful Life Event Scale and School Children Problem Scale.

RESULTS

Results showed a significant positive association between experience of stressful life events and adolescent psychopathology. Study also revealed that academic problems showed highest prevalence with cumulative stress of life whereas anxiousness, social withdrawal and feelings of rejection showed maximum prevalence with family related stressful experiences.

CONCLUSION

These findings have important implications for clinicians, school psychologists and social workers.

KEY WORDS

Stressful Life Events, Prevalence, Emotional & Behavioral Problems

INTRODUCTION

Being a critical and transitional developmental phase, adolescence is marked by several changes including physical maturation, emerging sexuality, growing peer influence and need for autonomy as well as multiple sources of stress. Exposure to a variety of life stressors may make them vulnerable for developing many kinds of psychopathologies¹ i.e., aggression, social alienation and self-consciousness.²

An enormous body of research has divulged a significant association between the experience of stressful life events and adolescent psychopathology. Among the many etiological factors of child psychopathology, adverse life events have been promised as the strongest predictors of both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems.^{3,4} These findings were further endorsed by several researchers revealing a positive relationship between the experience of stressful life events and problem behaviors i.e., conduct problems⁵ anxiety and depression.⁶

Over and above this debate, a plenty of research has manifested that the accumulation of stressful life experiences rather than any single stressor increases the risk of emotional and behavioral problems.^{7,8} However, parallel to these findings, research has also documented a great variation in how young people respond to single or cumulative life stressors or to the same level of stress^{9,11} depending upon multiple social and personal factors.¹²

In Pakistan, a number of researches have been carried out to study emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents; however, there is hardly any evidence on studying these problems in the context of stressful life events. Hence this study was primarily intended to establish the relationship between the experience of stressful life events and emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents. The second objective of the study was to explore the prevalence of different problem behaviors in the targeted youth.

SUBJECT AND METHODS

Sample

Sample of the present study comprised of 303 adolescents, of whom, 54% were girls and 46% were boys whereas 67% of the adolescents were belonging to joint family system. The inclusion criterion was the experience of any stressful life event during the last 12 months with an age range of 12 to 18 years ($M=15.27$, $SD=1.20$). Sample was selected Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Gujrat cities of Pakistan through purposive convenient sampling technique.

Instruments:

1. Stressful Life Events Scales (SLES)

Stressful Life Events Scale (SLES)¹³ was developed by Rehna & Hanif to assess the experiences of stressful life events of adolescents. SLES consists of 87 items with five categories 'Health related events', 'School related events', 'Personal & Social Events', 'Family & Friends related Events', and 'Natural Disasters'. SLES is a Likert type rating scale on which subjects first have to indicate whether they have experienced the event or not and then to rate the level of stress the event on 4-point rating scale.

2. School Children's Problems Scale (SCPS)

School Children's Problems Scale (SCPS)¹⁴ was employed to assess emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents in the current study. SCPS was devised by Saleem & Mehmood in 2011. SCPS is a 4-point (from 0 = not at all to 3 = extremely common) Likert type rating scale which constitutes of the six dimensions of emotional and behavioral problems including Anxiousness, Academic Problems, Aggression, Social Withdrawal, Feeling of Rejection and Psychosomatic Complaints. Alpha coefficients of SCPS and its sub dimensions range from .74 to .92 for the present study.

PROCEDURE

Adolescents were approached individually after signing a consent agreement of participating in the present study. Adolescents were given instructions to fill the questionnaire carefully and provide as much genuine information as possible. Data was amassed with the proviso of confidentiality and privacy. Each adolescent took almost 40 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

RESULTS

Results showed that stressful life event scale and all the sub scales of SCPS have good alpha coefficients indicating high internal consistencies of the scales (Table 1). Significant inter-scale correlations further endorse the internal consistency of SCPS and its sub dimensions. Values of skewness and kurtosis show that data is normally distributed for all the variables. Results further revealed that experiences of stressful life events have significant positive correlation with each of the emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents (Table 1).

Regarding prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents, findings showed that all problems have high prevalence rate (Figure 1) among adolescents who experience any stressful life event. However, academic problems showed the highest prevalence (99.3%) rate indicating that adolescents with stressful life experiences suffer from academic difficulties most frequently than

any other problem.

Prevalence of the emotional and behavioral problems was also computed for each category of adverse life events separately. Findings (Table 2) revealed that anxiety, social withdrawal and feelings of rejection were most prevalent among the adolescents who experience family related stressful experiences most often (75.1, 73.3%, and 73.3% respectively); aggression was most prevalent in personal and social adverse experiences (73.3%), whereas the highest prevalence of somatic complaints and academic problems (63.1% and 76.2% respectively) were seen in school related stressful experiences.

Table 1:

Correlations, alpha coefficients, and descriptive statistics of the study variables (N=303)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. ESLE	-	.64**	.56**	.63**	.71**	.71**	.53**
2. ANX	-	-	-.89**	.81**	.67**	.58**	.34**
3. AGG	-	-	-	-.76**	.60**	.47**	.22**
4. SW	-	-	-	-	.65**	.52**	.27**
5. SC	-	-	-	-	-	.62**	.53**
6. FR	-	-	-	-	-	-	.63**
7. AP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
α	.81	.92	.92	.82	.76	.91	.74
M(SD)	35.32 (12.91)	30.41 (10.07)	20.75 (6.46)	18.17 (5.09)	9.57 (3.15)	12.60 (4.88)	22.96 (7.0)
Skewness	.59	-.02	-.12	-.02	-.06	-.12	.03
Kurtosis	-.34	-1.26	-1.03	-1.03	-.93	-1.26	1.68

** $p < .001$

Note: ESLE= Experience of Stressful Life Events, ANX=Anxiety, AGG=Aggression, SW=Social Withdrawal, SC=Somatic Complaints, FR=Feelings of Rejection, AP=Academic Problems

Table 2:

Percentages of Emotional and Behavioral Problems in Each Category of Stressful Life Events Experienced by Adolescents (N=303)

	ANX %	AGG %	SW %	SC %	FR %	AP %
Health Related Events	21.2	21.3	18.7	22.1	22.1	20.3
School Related Events	40.8	46.2	41.9	63.1	37.3	76.2
Residence Related Events	24.1	24.9	23.1	23.4	19.6	23.2
Personal & Social Events	70.6	73.3	71.9	31.6	72.7	71.9
Family Related Events	75.1	30.3	73.3	43	73.3	74.9

Note: ANX=Anxiety, AGG=Aggression, SW=Social Withdrawal, SC=Somatic Complaints, FR=Feelings of Rejection, AP=Academic Problems

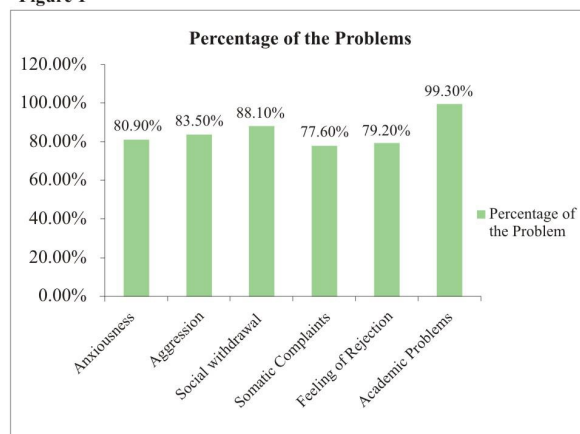
Table 3
Mean differences in boys and girls on Emotional and Behavioral Problems (N=303)

Variables	Boys (n = 139)		Girls (n = 164)		t	df	p	95%CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				LL	UL	
ANX	23.21	6.35	43.05	7.59	-24.42	301	000	-21.45	-18.25	2.83
AGG	30.27	3.16	17.66	5.36	24.37	301	000	11.59	13.63	2.86
SW	15.04	3.78	25.14	3.62	-23.71	301	000	-10.94	-9.26	2.73
SC	11.41	2.04	14.05	2.21	-10.74	301	000	-3.12	-2.16	1.24
FR	14.71	3.45	17.74	3.43	-7.74	301	000	-3.79	-2.26	.88
AP	28.73	2.98	28.98	4.48	-.57	301	.57	-1.13	.62	.06
Total Problems	138.5	17.18	152.8	18.67	-6.88	301	000	-18.36	-10.19	.80

***p < .001

Note: ANX=Anxiety, AGG=Aggression, SW=Social Withdrawal, SC=Somatic Complaints, FR=Feelings of Rejection, AP=Academic Problems

Figure 1



DISCUSSION

Results supported that there is a significant positive correlation between the experience of stressful life events and adolescents' emotional and behavioral problems. These findings are congruent with the previous researches⁵ showing that a higher number of stressful life events predicted higher levels of emotional problems and delinquent behaviors among adolescents. Further endorsement can be drawn from another study¹⁵ which revealed a linear positive relationship between different life stressors and mental health problems among adolescents.

Regarding the prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents, the present study divulged that academic problems and social withdrawal (Figure 1) were the most frequently occurring problems among adolescents with cumulative life stress. Whereas, in specific, anxiousness, social withdrawal and feelings of rejection had the maximum prevalence rate with family related stressful experiences of life. These results are consistent with the previous

research⁶ demonstrating a greater effect size of family-related adverse events on emotional problems of adolescents.

Study further revealed that female adolescents were significantly higher on total difficulties and emotional problems as compared to their counterparts. However boys showed greater level of aggression than girls. Previous researches also reported an increase of internalizing problems in adolescent girls than boys¹⁶ and also documented that boys exceed girls in rates of externalizing problems throughout childhood and adolescence.^{17,18}

CONCLUSION

Findings revealed that experiences of stressful life events have positive correlation with each of the emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents. Study also concluded that most of the problems showed highest prevalence among adolescents with family related stressful experiences.

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